

Employment of People with Disabilities

Issues Concerning Open and Supported Employment

- The Experience of The Hong Kong Association for the Mentally Handicapped

Nora Wong, General Secretary

The Hong Kong Association for the Mentally Handicapped

Introduction

For thirty years, The Hong Kong Association for the Mentally Handicapped has worked towards providing education and training for people with mental handicaps. From a humble beginning of one class for four children, we now run 14 special schools and 26 service units providing a wide range of services for over 3,500 mentally handicapped people of all ages.

Our interest in employment really started in 1976, when we set up an Advanced Training Centre at Pinehill Village to provide vocational training for students from the age of 16. Our 2-year training programme stretches from daytime to evening. Trainees spend regular working hours at the workshop, where they learn various skills, and then the evening programme is designed to improve their self-care and social skills. In the past, about 82% of the Centre's graduates had been able to find open employment, but that level has slipped by 10% this year, probably due to economic changes in Hong Kong and higher unemployment.

In 1992, the Association moved into supported employment, setting up the first job training and employment team in Hong Kong, to provide job training and placement service to mentally handicapped adults. The service includes assessments of working ability, pre-job training courses, job placements and follow-up counselling services. We now run two job training teams and have found jobs for 223 people.

Graduates from the Advanced Training Centre and the two job training teams earn an average of HK\$3,500 per month. We have people working in hotels, factories, offices, The Chinese University of Hong Kong and many fast food restaurants.

Problems Encountered

Despite these successes, we still face many difficulties in trying to find jobs for our trainees in the open market. I will highlight four particular problems.

1. Acceptance

Supervisors and co-workers have difficulty accepting our trainees, usually because they do not understand the abilities and needs of people with mental handicaps. Although some co-workers are willing to offer help, they often do not know how to do so. For example, they do not realise that they have to give simple and clear instructions to their mentally handicapped colleagues. In our experience, arranging orientation sessions for co-workers is not easy.

2. Rapid turnover of colleagues

A high turnover rate of colleagues, especially immediate supervisors, often bewilders and confuses mentally handicapped workers. If these changes are too frequent, they find it difficult to adjust.

3. Economic change in Hong Kong

Hong Kong's rapid transition from a manufacturing-based economy to a service-based economy is forcing a lot of mentally handicapped workers to look for jobs of a new nature. However it is difficult for them to learn new skills. Everyone needs sufficient re-training in order to cope with these changes and this is even more important for people with mental handicaps. Re-training for them often means starting again from square one.

4. High unemployment

Many employers hesitate to employ workers with mental handicaps. With the present high unemployment rate, the situation is becoming even worse and jobs for mentally handicapped workers are harder to come by. In the past, some employers were willing to try our workers because they stay in jobs and are

willing to take up work of a repetitive nature, which others may find boring. With so many people now out of jobs, we are losing this competitive advantage.

Better Support, More Opportunities

I have outlined four difficulties - lack of acceptance by other workers, rapid and bewildering turnover of supervisors and colleagues, economic changes which demand new skills and the present high rate of unemployment. These are all serious problems - but they are problems which have answers. The answers are: better support and more opportunities.

I. Better support

Simply finding jobs for people with mental handicaps is not enough. We have to provide support for these people while they are working - and when I say "we", I do not just mean our Association. I mean the whole community.

Three priorities:

1. Public education

Public education is vitally important to all areas of service to people with mental handicaps, but nowhere is it more important than in the area of employment. If employers and co-workers do not understand the abilities and needs of people with mental handicaps, they will not offer them jobs. The link is that simple, that direct.

Agencies such as ours have a role to play here. We now have a senior member of staff whose prime responsibility is to develop this public awareness and understanding. We have recreation centres called Gateway Clubs, where people with and without mental handicaps can mix freely. But public education is a huge task and clearly the main role must be played by government.

2. Continuing Education

Hong Kong is renowned for its ability to change - and change quickly. As one business goes down, another springs up. But people with mental handicaps often

have difficulty adapting to change, and so continuing education is essential. Many Hong Kong people pursue continuing education, but opportunities for people with mental handicap are very limited. We run a number of classes which are specially designed for workers with mental handicaps, but, frankly, we are serving only a fraction of the people who need help.

3. Counselling

When the Association finds a job for a person with mental handicap, our counselling staff follow that new worker's progress very closely for three months. There are regular visits to the workplace and follow-up calls at home in the evening - opportunities for the worker to talk about anything that may be troubling them in their new environment. However, resources and manpower are limited, and so at the end of this three-month period active counselling ends and we simply respond when contacted by the workers. I am sure sustained professional counselling can help many people with mental handicaps to overcome difficulties and to stay in their jobs for much longer.

II. Small Businesses

I have already mentioned the twin problems of high unemployment and the changing face of industry. One solution to these problems is for agencies to start their own small businesses for workers with mental handicaps. This is increasingly popular, and some of my colleagues from other agencies will be discussing their experiences.

Earlier this year our Association launched the concept of "Super Service Teams". These teams specialise in providing gardening and ground maintenance services, and, although a member of staff supervises each team, all the workers have mental handicaps. The results have been tremendous. We have won contracts to maintain public housing estates, private gardens, offices and even a country park. A few weeks ago we were awarded the contract to maintain the grounds of one of the largest plants on Tai Po Industrial Estate.

However, if "Super Service Teams" are to be really successful and economically viable, we need to be able to bid for government and municipal council contracts. The trouble here is that most of those contracts are so large and require such huge resources that we cannot compete with commercial contractors. The Governor has called for more job opportunities for people with mental handicaps. The government and the municipal councils could help us to create those opportunities by relaxing contract criteria for agencies employing workers with disabilities.

Conclusion

This has been a brief overview of some of the issues confronting workers with mental handicaps. If I seem to have dwelled on the problems, let me close by saying that there has been real progress in recent years. Slowly but surely, many more people with mental handicaps are moving out of sheltered workshops and training centres and are taking their places on production lines, on factory floors and in offices. Given the chance, workers with mental handicap can do the job. The slogan for this, our Association's 30th anniversary year, really says it all: "We want to work!"